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OFFICE OF THE WHITE HOUSE PRESS SECRETARY

THE WHITE HOUSE

REMARKS OF THE PRESIDENT
AT
THE ANNUAL CONFERENCE OF THE AMERICAN LEGION

The Capital Hilton Hotel

(11:03 A.M. EST)

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you very much, Frank, for your introduction and for your service to our country, both in your own military career, and now as National Commander of the American Legion. I assigned Frank one duty this morning, to have my hat ready when I got here. (Laughter.) And he said it would be ready as I leave. (Laughter.)

Well, it is a pleasure to be here with my fellow Legionnaires, and as Frank said, to represent American Legion Post 2 in Americus, Georgia, where my father before me served, as a veteran of World War I. My father was a first lieutenant, and I am sure at the time he never thought that his son would reach so high a rank as he himself in Georgia, in World War I. It has been three and a half years now since I outlined to you my national security goals at your national convention. I am proud of the success we have had in fulfilling those plans that you and I shared on that day.

We remain the world's most powerful force, and the American people and the Congress are now united with me in keeping the United States second to none in military strength. (Applause.) I have to tell you that this degree of common commitment has not always existed. During the last 12 years, for instance, the Congress has cut the Presidents' defense budgets by more than \$50 billion -- an average reduction below what the Presidents have proposed of more than \$4 billion per year.

Recently this pattern has changed, and we now have obvious and growing support throughout this country for a strong national defense. This new unity and this new determination must be sustained, not just for a few months, but so long as the serious challenges confront the United States of America, we must be united and determined to have a strong country. (Applause.)

I am very thankful that most Americans agree with you and me, that in order to insure an America at peace, we must and we will have that strong America. We are determined also to see the blessings of peace shared with other people around the world. At Camp David, and during my personal mission to the Mideast, we promoted peace between Egypt and Israel. In just a few days, a milestone will be passed in history when full diplomatic recognition is consummated with the exchange of Ambassadors between those two countries that have been at war four times in the last 30 years. Now work must continue toward that comprehensive peace that is so vital to the security of the United States and to stability in the Middle East.

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SALT II is not a panacea. It is a supplement, and not a substitute, for a strong defense. SALT II is not based on trust. It can be verified by our own national technical means.

I will consult very closely with the Congress when the time comes again to move toward ratification of the treaty.

During these past three years we have joined with our Atlantic allies to strengthen NATO, both its spirit and also its military capability. There is a new sense of cooperation and resolve, and a greater confidence that we together can deter aggression.

Another successful foreign policy initiative has great strategic significance. We have normalized relations with China while retaining our trade and friendship with the people of Taiwan. We now have a great opportunity to expand this new relationship to bring mutual advantages to both countries and to improve the prospects for a stable and a peaceful Asia. This is the first time I recall in history when our nation has been friends with both Japan and China at the same time.

And, as you well know, our nation's commitment to democracy, to human rights, to self-determination, and to economic stability and development has greatly improved our relations with the countries of the Third World.

These achievements have all been gratifying to you and to me, yet today, we face new and serious challenges.

At this very moment, 53 Americans are being held hostage in Iran. The long and continuous efforts to ensure the safe release of our people have now reached a particularly sensitive and intense stage. My task is to protect the interests and the principles of our nation while we negotiate for the release of the Americans who are being held as innocent prisoners.

I deeply appreciate the firmness, patience, the unity, and the will shown by almost all Americans during these days of crisis.

I cannot, and I will not, rest until every single American is home, safe, and free.

(Applause.)

Also, at this very moment, some 100,000 Soviet troops heavily armed seek to subjugate a proud and a once independent nation, a nation that presented no challenge to Soviet security and wanted only to retain their freedom.

This Soviet invasion of Afghanistan poses a threat to the independence of countries throughout Southwest Asia, and to the economic lifeblood of many nations, oil. It has altered the careful balance of forces in a vital, and a volatile area of the world.

That is why I did not hesitate to answer Soviet aggression with strong economic sanctions, including restrictions on grain shipments and sales of high technology to the Soviet Union.

That is why we joined with more than 100 other nations in the United Nations to condemn this aggression and to demand withdrawal of the Soviet invasion forces from Afghanistan.

(Applause.)

And that is why I have given notice that the United States will not attend the Moscow Olympics, unless the Soviet invasion forces

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And as I also stated clearly to the Congress: while protecting the constitutional rights of Americans, and avoiding the abuses of the past, we must remove all impediments to an effective intelligence capability for our nation. (Applause.)

At this time, I am strengthening our own military presence in the Persian Gulf region, and we are encouraging other nations to form a cooperative security framework, which can enhance their independence and help to preserve regional peace.

To underscore our resolve and our readiness, I have stepped up our overall defense effort and proposed registration for draft-age Americans. I have made it clear that there is no need at this time to reimpose the draft, but registration is a necessary precaution which will expedite mobilization if it should be required in the future.

Within our own country, opposing voices have been raised against these necessary actions -- against the grain embargo -- against the Olympic boycott -- against registration for the draft -- against full funding of the defense budget, which I have proposed to the Congress. In this developing debate concerning our national security, I need the support of freedom loving Americans everywhere, and I am sure that I can count on my fellow Legionnaires for your support. (Applause.)

It is important that everyone understands that every action that I have taken is peaceful and is designed to preserve peace. Because we seek peace, we have pursued -- and will pursue -- every opportunity to ease tensions. Because we seek peace, we have been cautious and restrained. Because we seek peace, we must leave no room for doubt among our allies and no room for miscalculation among our potential adversaries.

It is obvious that the Soviet leaders did miscalculate in Afghanistan. They underestimated the courage and the tenacity of freedom fighters in that country, and they did not anticipate the world's quick and forceful response to their aggression. They are now paying a high price in the number of casualties in Afghanistan, in our own actions, in the actions of our allies, and in the condemnation of virtually the entire Muslim and Third World community in the United Nations and in the individual and collective statements and actions.

There is no way for you or me to know the future plans of the Soviet leaders. We cannot be certain if or when they will withdraw their forces, if they seek colonial domination only in Afghanistan, or if they seek other conquests as well. No President of the United States can afford to gamble our peace and security upon wishful thinking about the present or the future intentions of the Soviet Union.

But we do know that our intentions must be crystal clear. We will stand firm against aggression and we will not accept business as usual with the Soviet Union while the invasion continues.

Our firmness is not a prelude to combat nor is it a return to the cold war. It is simply prudence -- to reduce the chances for a misjudgement that could be fatal to peace. It is a reaffirmation of a long-standing commitment and a sustained response to a strategic challenge.

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The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan has made everyone more aware of the importance of a strong defense capability. But since the process of strengthening our military forces has been underway for several years, the recent developments in Southwest Asia do not now require any major redesign of next year's defense budget; of course we will continue to review our requirements and make any necessary adjustments to meet changing circumstances.

I consider the increase in the defense budget for fiscal year 1981 to be necessary to assure our national security. It is a carefully measured amount, and it in no way signals a new or transient "boom" in defense spending. It is estimated quite accurately that the Soviet Union spends 13 percent of their gross national income or gross national product on defense. The percentage of our own gross national product represented by defense expenditures for 1981, is about 5 percent. And that share will hardly vary at all if the present projections of our defense expenditures are carried out in 1982, '83, '84, and '85, about 5 percent of our GNP. The impact of the additional expenditure on the inflation rate will be negligible.

These expenditures for defense are clearly within the capability of our American economy.

And moreover, we are spending our money well. We are strengthening our strategic "triad" that deters the Soviet nuclear threat.

I accelerated development of cruise missiles, which begin production this year. Because of their small size and the large numbers, cruise missiles will be far more effective than the B-1 bomber for penetrating Soviet air defenses now or those they can project in the future.

We have initiated a new MX missile system, and finally resolved schedule and contract problems that had stalled the Trident submarine program for so long. The first Trident was launched last year, and six more are under construction.

Because we have emphasized a stronger NATO, which had languished, as you know, during the Vietnam War, we now have commitments from our NATO partners for an annual three percent real growth in their own defense budgets. We have begun joint developments of new weapons, we have enhanced our ability for a rapid deployment of ground and air forces in Europe in a crisis, and have spurred modernization of NATO theater nuclear weapons to meet a threatening buildup of formidable Soviet nuclear missiles in that region of the world.

Our NATO allies keep about three million troops on active duty. Added to our two million, we can and we will maintain a powerful and effective force for the defense of Western Europe. You can depend on that because it is vital to our own nation's defense. (Applause.)

I have also emphasized, since I have been office, the general modernizing of the conventional forces of our country, to respond to military threats not only in Europe, but in other vital areas of the world.

We are re-equipping our ground forces. We have already expanded the number of tanks and infantry battalions.

We are modernizing our Navy with an additional aircraft carrier, new guided missile ships, Harpoon cruise missiles, and new and more modern and effective attack submarines. We have now underway the first full-scale modernization of tactical air forces since the 1960s.

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To achieve that goal, we have already begun development of a new fleet of large transport planes, and a force of maritime prepositioning ships with enough supplies and heavy equipment for three Marine brigades. The sum of all these defense efforts is a clear message: We have not abdicated -- and we will not abdicate -- the responsibility of the United States to help maintain a peaceful world.

Our commitment to world peace is two-fold: We and our allies must be able to meet any military challenge and we must be strong and principled as we seek to resolve disputes and to reduce tensions. Preventing nuclear war is a preeminent task, to repeat what I said earlier. That is why the last three U.S. Presidents have negotiated the strategic arms limitation treaties -- and I will not abandon this effort to control nuclear weapons. In fact, the immediate crisis underscores the importance of mutual constraints on nuclear weapons. Because it serves our security interests, I remain committed to the ratification of the SALT II Treaty.

Last month I said in my State of the Union address that we must face the world as it is. We must be honest with ourselves and we must be honest with others. That is why three years ago I determined to reverse the declining effectiveness of our military forces. And that is why I have worked so hard to fight inflation as we develop a national energy policy. We are dangerously dependent on imported oil, and there is no cheap way out.

Let me quote from the American Legion's own energy policy statement: "Our national security, as well as our economic security, cannot exist without energy independence .."

I thank you again for your hard work and your effective efforts to face facts and to help build a secure future for our country. We cannot spend or regulate our way out of every national problem. Nor can we abolish inflation by decree. That is the truth. Above all, whether it is registration of young people, increased military strength for ourselves and our allies, or increased energy conservation and production, we cannot have peace and security without a willingness to sacrifice. That is the most important truth of all.

With your help and with the support of the American people, I propose to carry on the struggle for a strong nation, for a just society, and for a peaceful world. Harry Truman, a member of the American Legion, once wrote, "It is not our nature to shirk obligations. We have a heritage that constitutes the greatest resource of this nation. I call it the spirit and the character of the American people."

Today, I call again on that heritage, that spirit and that character, represented so well by you Legionnaires and by others who have always been willing to defend our nation, and to preserve our freedom.

Thank you very much. (Applause.)

END

(AT 11:34 A.M. EST)